

# Effective Implementation of Standards

**How to Achieve the Promise of Standards**

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# Standards Matter

## Introduction

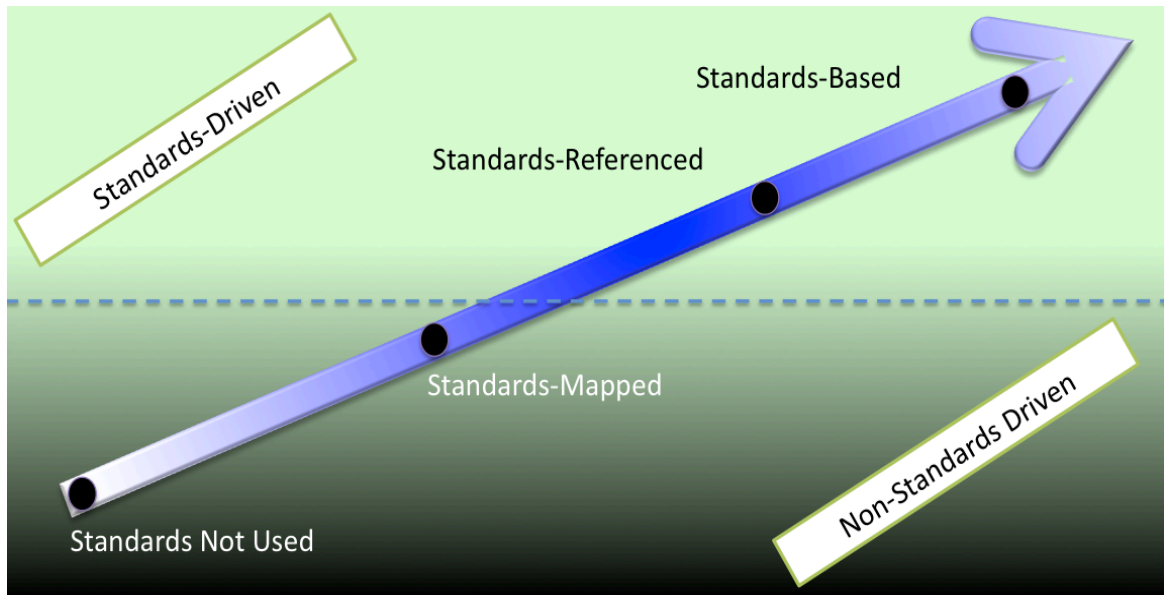
State standards play an essential role in education. As a former teacher and administrator who taught various subjects at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, I believe that standards improve teaching and learning when used correctly. At the most fundamental level, standards establish and communicate the baseline expectations for learning and achievement for all students. Having common expectations encourages schools and educators to be consistent in their practices so that all students have equitable opportunities to gain the foundation needed to be successful later in college and in the work force. Standards clarify what is important for all students to know and be able to do by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and they provide an important guidepost for educators, students, parents, and other stakeholders. They also have the potential to be a springboard for compelling and innovative instruction and learning. However, if standards are to have a positive impact on the learning of all students, then schools and districts must have the capacity to use standards appropriately to support high-quality teaching and learning (Cristol & Ramsey, 2014). In my work across the country helping schools and districts implement state standards, I have seen firsthand the different effects when implementation either succeeds or fails.

## A Continuum of Standards-Based Implementation

Despite the important role standards play in promoting achievement and equity for all learners, the standards themselves do not guarantee intended achievement outcomes (Marzano, 2009). Education researcher Robert Marzano (2003) found that schools that deliberately use standards to create “guaranteed and viable” opportunities for students to learn the content and skills described in the standards outperform schools that do not use standards as strategically. In other words, if schools do not use standards to build or select curriculum, instruction, and assessment resources, then the actual teaching and learning will not align with the standards.

In my experience providing direct services to schools and districts, I have found that there are four distinct ways schools implement standards. These can be viewed along a Continuum of Standards-Based Implementation (Figure 1).

Figure 1 — Continuum of Standards-Based Implementation



In the bottom half of the Continuum are two ineffective approaches to standards implementation where standards have very little influence on teaching and learning. At the lowest level of implementation, most teachers are unaware of the standards and they make no changes in teaching practice. The second ineffective approach involves simply engaging educators in mapping the new standards onto preexisting resources and documents. In both cases, predetermined content, programs, or resources drive curriculum, instruction, and assessment — not standards.

In the top half of the continuum are two levels of implementation where standards have a more significant influence on teaching and learning. For example, at the third level of implementation, Standards-Referenced, educators *use* the standards to select or create curriculum, instruction, and assessments that become their resources for teaching and learning. At the highest level of effective implementation, teachers *also* use standards to analyze student work and data in order to continuously adjust instruction to meet student needs and to support ongoing progress. In both cases, standards are routinely used to inform and drive educational practices that have a direct impact on learning.

## The Need for Professional Development

In order for standards to have the opportunity to positively impact student learning, the implementation of new standards should be done at the third and fourth levels of the continuum. However, for schools to function at these levels requires that educators and administrators understand how to use standards to shape curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Schools and districts also must have the capacity to routinely use standards to inform decision-making (Spillane, 2009). Various studies suggest that

even when teachers are willing to use standards, they are often unprepared to do so (e.g. WestEd, 2012). Unfortunately, implementation of rigorous state standards often does not include enough support and professional development for teachers (Liebtag, 2013). Below is a brief description of three important steps I encourage educators to take so your state standards have the opportunity to improve teaching and learning. All of these require substantial professional development.

## Examples of Effective Professional Development Activities

### **Develop deep understanding of the standards to be taught**

In order to leverage standards to support learning, teachers must have the time, resources, guidance, and knowledge to make sense of the standards (Spillane, 2009). Educational experts who write standards try their best to be clear in articulating the knowledge and skills that students need to learn, but teachers still must spend time getting familiar with and developing an accurate understanding of every standard they are professionally required to teach. Consider, for example, that the verb *analyze* is ubiquitous across all sets of standards but can mean many different things. Various skills and procedures fit under the umbrella of analysis. Analysis might include breaking down information, looking for cause and effect relationships, or sorting and classifying data, to name just a few (Marzano & Haystead, 2008). So, it is essential for teachers to have time to collaboratively make sense of the standards and the specific types of knowledge, skills, and procedures needed for each. They need time to determine *how* they will teach each one.

### **Develop an understanding of the standards across grade levels**

Most sets of standards are organized into vertical, grade-level or grade-span progressions that range from kindergarten (or even earlier) to the end of high school. These progressions look like the rungs on a ladder. The upper rung of a progression defines the skills and knowledge a student needs to have by a certain time — often the end of high school. The remaining rungs define grade-level or grade-span benchmarks beginning at a novice level (e.g., kindergarten) and increasing in sophistication toward the top rung (e.g., 12<sup>th</sup> grade).

Standards identify a reasonable and developmentally appropriate level of proficiency at any particular grade level or span, yet most classrooms frequently have students at different rungs of the ladder. Therefore, teachers must understand not only the standards for the particular grade or grade span they teach, but also for standards across other grade levels, particularly those adjacent to their specific grade or span.

## Apply knowledge of the standards to design curriculum, instruction, and assessments

Once teachers have acquired deep knowledge of the standards they will teach, including the standards in adjacent grades, they must routinely use their understanding to establish and/or create effective and appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment resources and materials. These include, but are not limited to, the following: scope and sequences, units of studies, lessons, activities, as well as summative, benchmark, and formative assessments. Using standards to effectively engage in this work often requires a significant shift in teachers' practice (Goldsworthy, Suppovitz, & Riggan, 2013), and experience suggests that many, if not most, teachers require support in learning how to use standards to design educational resources.

Standards do not define or dictate *how* or *when* teachers must teach the knowledge and skills for any grade level or grade span. Since educators must make sure students have the opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills within the standards, it is essential that educators at the district and school levels work collaboratively to organize and sequence standards into logical units of study, instructional sequences, and learning objectives. These are often complex and time-consuming processes. Teachers need time to engage in this work together.

After standards-based curricula have been established, teachers can then use these materials to design instruction and assessment materials. The most effective methods to teach teachers how to do this is to provide and model the use of specific tools and protocols that guide standards-driven work, and to help schools build capacity for teachers to routinely engage in collaborative work using these tools (Mundry, 2005). In what is arguably one of the most robust meta-analyses on learning and achievement, Education researcher John Hattie (2012) has found that the most effective strategies for supporting learning are those that make learning and growth visible and transparent. This is true for all learners, including adults. When teachers have time, resources, and opportunities to increase the utilization of standards-based tools in supportive, adult learning environments, their practices become visible to each other, and we see teaching and instruction shift and become more standards-driven.

## The Impact of Changes to Standards

Regardless of which standards are used as a framework for the design of local curricula, it is important for policymakers at the state and local levels to understand what it takes to implement new educational standards to drive effective teaching and learning. It is important to recognize the necessary supports needed by districts, schools, and teachers when new standards are introduced or existing standards are revised significantly. This is particularly true given that there are significant concerns about the

adequacy and consistency of state support for implementing the Common Core State Standards (Best & Cohen, 2013). For schools and districts that are not standards-driven, any changes — especially increases in rigor — will unfortunately have little to no impact, because standards have not been used to drive teaching and learning. For schools that are standards-based and using standards to design curriculum and drive teaching and learning, new or modified standards will require ongoing support and resources, including significant time to reframe curricula and support teachers as they redesign instructional materials and assessments aligned to new standards. In addition, when a state or district changes its standards in such a way that subject matter is moved from one grade level to another (e.g., when a standard previously taught in 4<sup>th</sup> grade is taught in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade under the new standards), teachers and schools must identify any potential gaps of knowledge that might develop for some students. Decision-makers need to consider how, when, and where to implement such changes to standards, determining whether a phased in approach might best support instructional practice and student learning.

In conclusion, it is important for states to set standards that establish a high level of expectations for student learning. Once standards have been set, it is essential to provide local education agencies with the time, professional development, resources, and guidance necessary to understand the standards. This is necessary for educators to be able to use the standards to leverage and support effective teaching and learning. As Richard Elmore (2002) has written, “if the public and policymakers want increased attention to academic quality and performance, the *quid pro quo* is investing in the knowledge and skill necessary to produce it” (p. 5).

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